

Pirates make Keller a happy guy

Written by Jim Ecker

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Mitch Keller plans to play for the Xavier Saints in their doubleheader at Cedar Rapids Prairie Friday night, but he probably won't be around much longer.

The Pirates selected the 6-foot-3 right-hander from Xavier High School Thursday night in the second round of the Major League Draft with the 64th pick overall.

Keller said Friday morning he's interested in signing with Pittsburgh, rather than attending the University of North Carolina, but said no final decisions have been made.

The signing bonus for the 64th pick is slotted at \$886,800, although final terms can be negotiated. The contract would include money for college, should he elect to attend school at some point.

Keller said he barely got any sleep Thursday night after hearing his name called in the draft while watching on MLB.com. It took nearly five hours, but he finally got the news he wanted.

"It got more nerve-racking and stressful (as the night wore on)," he said. "It was overwhelming last night, but it feels good right now. I feel really good about it."

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The Pirates called Thursday night just a few minutes before they made it official at draft headquarters. "They told me they were going to pick me," he said. "It all happened so fast."

Keller communicated with all of the Major League teams in the weeks and months prior to the draft, but he had not heard from the Pirates recently and was caught a little off-guard when they called to say he was their man.

"I was kind of surprised, because we didn't really hear much from them in the days leading up to the draft," he said.

Keller did not want to talk specifically about whether he plans to sign or not, but there's every indication he will. "I'm not really supposed to say right now," he remarked.

Keller plans to speak with a member of the Pittsburgh organization today. The Pirates have their training camp in Bradenton, Fla.

Pittsburgh General Manager Neal Huntington spoke highly of Keller in a story published on the Pirates' website.

"Mitch is a high-ceiling right-hander," said Huntington. "We like the frame, and the quality of his pitches."

Pittsburgh selected shortstop Cole Tucker with the 24th pick, outfielder/first baseman Connor Joe with the 29th pick and pitcher Trey Supak with the 73rd pick Thursday night.

Keller has signed with the University of North Carolina and has enrolled for summer school, but has said he'd probably skip college and sign a pro contract if he liked his spot in the draft and the bonus money.

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"Signability never drives our selections," said Huntington. "We make them based on how we like them. But I hope and expect to get them all signed, and get them out soon to start their careers.

"I'm optimistic about getting all four of these to agree to terms," said Huntington. "At the end of the day, these are four very good players we look forward to getting into our system."

Keller's fastball has been clocked at 95 mph. He also has a sharp curveball.

Jon Keller, Mitch's older brother, played at Nebraska and the University of Tampa before signing a pro contract with the Baltimore Orioles. He is pitching for Delmarva in the South Atlantic League this season and doing very well.

Baltimore's training camp is in Sarasota, Fla., which is a short drive from Bradenton and Pittsburgh's training camp, which means the Keller brothers would be near each other in spring training.